Are fathers really necessary?

Xuan Li reviews the arguments in favour and against the role of fathers in parenting

On 15 June 2008, Barack Obama, then a senator of the USA, visited the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago and gave a Father’s Day speech. During the speech, Obama recounted his own fatherless childhood, the toll that father absence took on him, and the struggles his mother had as a single parent. While acknowledging that many single mothers had done a ‘heroic job’ raising their children, he stressed the critical importance of the father’s involvement in child rearing. [The single mothers] need another parent. Their children need another parent. That’s what keeps their foundation strong. It’s what keeps the foundation of our country strong.

What Obama said clearly highlighted the benefit of a father’s engagement in parenting for both the child and for the child’s mother. The role of male parents is positively portrayed in the media nowadays. For example, think of how male celebrities’ public image is enhanced through a public presence with their children (e.g. David Beckham). At the same time, however, the increasing number of female-headed households — be it a family with one single mother or two lesbian mothers — makes us wonder whether it is necessary to have a male parent in the house at all. Does the father make a real, significant difference? If he does, what is it about him that matters?

The ‘missing father’ paradigm
There had been no shortage of discussion on the father’s role in child development before the twentieth century, for example by Sigmund Freud. However, the question of the father’s significance rose to serious scholarly attention after the Second World War, which deprived many children of their fathers either permanently or for an extended period of time.

Scholars compared children with and without a co-resident father, and concluded that the missing father had a long-term detrimental effect for children’s sex-role development, especially boys. According to these researchers, boys growing up without fathers in their early years would demonstrate less assertive behaviours than their ‘fathered’ peers.

This strand of research, possibly inspired by John Bowlby’s (1951) research which investigated the consequence of ‘maternal deprivation’, marked some of the first attempts in exploring the necessity of the father, and brought the issue of ‘fatherlessness’ to public attention. However, such research over-simplified the father’s role (looking at a simple difference of father present or absent) and failed to include other important factors, such as the family socio-economic situation or the quality of the father–mother relationship.

Signposts
attachment, gender

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Measuring father involvement
As the early studies were re-examined in the 1970s and their weaknesses revealed, many psychologists took a more in-depth approach to investigate the fathers’ involvement in childcare, in the hope that this would help us better understand their contributions (or the lack thereof). To accurately measure the quality and quantity of father involvement, family scientists turned to large questionnaire surveys using supposedly representative samples to get a general idea of what and how much fathers do.

Frustratingly, these data yielded rather divergent, baffling results: the reported father-child time ranged from less than 1 minute to 8 hours per day. How could we explain this large variance? Was it that survey respondents gave unreliable estimates, or was it that researchers asked the wrong questions?

Different kinds of father involvement
One group of scholars, Lamb et al. (1987), carefully reviewed the existing studies on father involvement and realised that father involvement is not a simple, one-dimensional construct that could be captured in one question. Playing with a child in the family garden is a very different parental task from looking for a paediatrician for the child, for instance. According to Lamb and his colleagues, the content of father involvement could be divided into three categories:

1. Engagement, which involves direct interactions with a child, such as helping a child with school work.
2. Accessibility, which means that a father stays close enough to be available for his child without directly engaging with the child (e.g., reading newspaper in the next room at home).
3. Responsibility, which refers to the wide range of tasks that parents shoulder to ensure the child’s welfare, from making childcare arrangements and knowing a child’s whereabouts to more psychological tasks such as talking through problems at school. The last category is particularly pervasive and difficult to capture and had therefore been overlooked in many prior studies.

How do fathers perform on each of these three dimensions, in comparison with mothers? While exact figures vary from study to study, it was found, consistently, that fathers in heterosexual two-parent households do less than mothers, although fathers now spend a longer time with children than those in previous generations.

Father involvement when mothers work
One might intuitively expect that fathers now 'have to' devote more time to their parental role, given that mothers are increasingly active...
in the workforce. Surprisingly, this is not the case: the fathers with employed partners do shoulder a higher proportion of child-rearing tasks, but a closer look at the absolute amount of time investment by both parents suggested that this is because employed mothers do less, not because fathers do more.

'Backstage' tasks
Are there other ways in which fathers contribute to their children’s lives apart from engagement, accessibility and responsibility? Developmental psychologists and family scientists are increasingly aware that fathers perform many valuable ‘backstage’ tasks that are woven into the fabric of everyday family life and thus less ‘visible’ at first sight. Breadwinning, i.e. the financial provision for the household, is such a central component of fatherhood that it is sometimes taken as a ‘default’ obligation and not included as a part of paternal contribution. The practical and psychological support to his female co-parent is another path through which a father benefits his children and family. By enhancing the mother’s welfare, the father could indirectly improve the quality of interaction his child experiences with its primary caregiver, which ultimately promotes the positive development of the child.

**Fathers: the unique contribution**
How does the existing research on father involvement help answer the question of a father’s necessity? It lays out a general picture of what fathers could do for their children in conventional two-parent households, and provides useful conceptual and methodological tools for researchers to quantify paternal involvement and build further links to children’s developmental outcomes. With this as the backdrop, scholars have gone further to look for evidence on the following:
1. Are fathers and mothers, besides the different *quantity* of time they spend on their children, involved in their children’s lives in *qualitatively* different ways?
2. Are these discrepancies associated with biological differences between men and women?
3. Do men per se contribute something different or is this simply a question of two parents being better than one?

**Qualitative differences**
Fathers and mothers — at least those in North America — demonstrate distinctively different interaction styles while playing with their babies: fathers are more likely to engage in challenging, stimulating play behaviour while mothers tend to be more protective and soothing. These findings jointly suggest that fathers and mothers might participate in different domains of children’s lives (play versus care), and might perform their parental roles in different interactive styles.

Perhaps because of such differences, fathers appear to exert different influences on child development than mothers. When developmental psychologists — with the help of statistical techniques — teased apart and compared maternal and paternal influences on child development, they found that the fathers’ impact only becomes visible at later
stages of child development (e.g. adolescence and early adulthood), whereas mothers show greater immediate and short-term influence, especially when the child is young. Mothers enhance their school-age children's academic achievement through engagement in school events, whereas fathers do this through expectations for their children's future education attainment, not actual involvement. Such evidence indicates that mothers and fathers contribute to child development in their own ways and possibly through separate mechanisms.

The biological argument
In terms of innate differences, men and women both learn to parent 'on the job' and they have a similar starting point, contrary to the popular stereotype that only women have the 'maternal instinct'. Ross Parke and his colleagues, in a series of well-designed studies, observed fathers' and mothers' behaviour towards their newborn babies (to avoid the influence of the mothers' longer caregiving time). They found that fathers are not only as interested as the mothers in their babies, but they are just as good at understanding the babies' cues (e.g. crying). These studies indicated that men and women have the same potential to become caregivers and that their seemingly 'different' parental sensitivity is likely to be the result of different role expectations and their different experiences in caring for the child.

The second parent
In the 'father-absent' model, research compares children with one single mother to children in heterosexual two-parent families. In such cases there are an unequal number of parents and thus (usually) reduced physical and psychological resources.

It has been widely found that, in general, children from single-parent families do not fare as well as their counterparts in two-parent households even when economic factors are controlled for, indicating that two parents are better than one. But do the two parents have to be a man and a woman? By comparing families headed by two lesbian versus two heterosexual parents, both with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, researchers found no difference in children's developmental outcomes between the two family types. (Note that child development studies and literature tend to focus on lesbian parents more often than gay parents.)

This line of research provides evidence that fathers' necessity lies in their role as extra parents, who provide additional financial and emotional support — and not in the fact that they are male.

Having said that, it is important to point out that having a single parent who is, for example, well-educated, financially secure and emotionally warm is better than having two parents who are irresponsible/abusive/underprivileged (see, for example, Lamb et al. 1987).

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Complete these activities to consolidate your understanding of the article 'Are fathers really necessary?'

1. Xuan Li summarises the role and importance of fathers in the wider context of modern-day parenting. She describes the impact of Bowlby's research which she says 'oversimplified the father's role'. What do you think she means by this in the wider context of how we view the roles of fathers today? Which specific factors did Bowlby overlook and how important do you think these are today? Justify your answer with specific examples.

2. The author suggests on page 23 that a re-examination of the father's role in childcare, using mainly questionnaire data, showed 'divergent and baffling results' with huge variations in fathers' contributions to family life. How does Michael Lamb's subsequent research clarify this and what are your own explanations for possible reasons for this variance in findings?

3. Research suggests that fathers' roles vary depending on whether they are in heterosexual or single-parent families. How might this finding translate into everyday childcare practice?

4. Xuan Li suggests that fathers do 'backstage' tasks that are woven into the fabric of everyday family life and thus 'less visible' at first sight. What sorts of activities might this involve?

5. Recent research by Parke et al. (see 'The biological argument' above) suggests that fathers are equally as interested as mothers in their babies and also show equal (not deficient) maternal sensitivity in terms of their baby's needs. To what extent, therefore, are the perceived differences in parental role as caregivers due to different (outdated) role expectations of previous generations?

6. Comparisons of factors that affect parental effectiveness suggest that this issue is not about gender but rather financial and emotional support that two parents can offer. What conclusions can you draw from this in relation to the necessity of fathers?

7. Why do you think that fathers have been the 'forgotten generation in childcare' (even being completely excluded from previous psychology specifications at A-level)? To what extent do you welcome looking at families as 'fathers and mothers in complementary roles'?

Anthony Curtis